

School districts across New York face cuts

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6 April 2013

The New York state budget process has drawn to close, and public school aid has not increased at a rate that will prevent many districts from laying off staff and increasing student-teacher ratios to as high as 30 students per classroom.

The total state budget was \$135 billion with \$25.5 billion going to education—an increase of less than 3 percent (\$720 million) from last year.

The formula for the funding of public schools in New York state is combination of local property tax and state aid from revenue derived mostly from income tax. Many cities in Upstate New York have a substantial portion of properties that are tax exempt, decreasing the income, while state aid has not kept up with the skyrocketing costs of medical care and other benefits. More than one half of the tax base for the city of Syracuse is exempt from property tax.

The reason cities like Syracuse grant such exemptions is that they host large public institutions such as universities and medical centers, and have also granted tax breaks to large private development projects, typically hotels, shopping centers, and special economic development zones. It is a common practice for private developers to pit different regions against one another for the best subsidy packages.

The economic crisis in the Central New York region has forced many local schools to cut staff through attrition and early retirement offers to those with valuable knowledge. School districts have also widely cut elective programs and sports. After multiple rounds of such reductions, many schools are now running bare bones, with basic education being affected.

New York state legislators have increased public school aid statewide by \$936 million from last year's budget. A press release announcing the passage of the budget reveals the cynical use of school funding as leverage against teachers to the detriment of students: "To maintain New York State's leadership in holding

teachers accountable for student achievement, the Budget continues to tie increases in funding for education to the implementation of a teacher evaluation system."

The Ithaca school district expects to receive an increase of \$450,000 in state aid this year, which is about half of the \$940,000 aid increase the district received last year. In the *Ithaca Journal*, Superintendent Luvelle Brown said, "health benefit costs for Ithaca schools are up 6 percent, teacher retirement costs are up 37 percent and employee retirement costs increased 11 percent."

The school district for the city of Elmira has proposed cutting close to 30 positions, mostly teachers. A small number of the eliminations would come through attrition, but many would be laid off.

Public schools in Syracuse, which serve more than 19,000 students, could see close to 100 positions cut. The layoffs could bring some class sizes to 30 pupils. The district states that the number of people being laid off is expected to be fewer after early retirements and other reductions are figured in. Losing experienced teachers and support employees is nothing new for the Syracuse school district. In the past four years, 950 positions have been cut, and this new round will push the total to more than 1,000 jobs cut.

In Auburn, school aid is expected to increase by more than 10 percent. At the same time, the district has been reclassified by the state from an "average needs" area to a "high needs" one, entitled to increased aid on a formula based on the increasing poverty and joblessness and lowered property tax base. An additional \$3.3 million in aid is said to be enough to prevent staff cuts. No mention is made, however, of whether the district would be hiring additional staff after deep cuts experienced in the preceding years. Earlier in the budget process, the Auburn school superintendent, Constance D. Evelyn, commented, "I

feel that we are academically insolvent. I'm absolutely loathed to see class sizes of 26 or 27 students.”

New York governor Andrew Cuomo, a Democrat, is awarding grants to other “higher needs” schools, which are generally in areas stricken with high unemployment and poverty.

A large award was announced for several Syracuse-area schools with a number of strings attached, one being that at least half the staff be fired at struggling schools and required to reapply to transfer to other schools. The plans are to place newer teachers at lower pay scales with fewer benefits.

Governor Cuomo, in a much promoted measure, set a 2 percent cap on how much a district can raise property taxes, which triggers higher voter approval requirement (60 percent). A high percentage of the state's residents have approved when asked to vote for higher rate.



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